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ABSTRACT

Issues-centered curriculum is an anomaly within the social studies classroom, most often overshadowed by the dominant framework that includes teacher-centered, textbook-driven, subject-focused lessons. An instructor of social studies methods chose to break with the content-dominant tradition and introduce issues-centered social studies to the preservice teachers in an early childhood methods course. This paper describes an action research study in which a primary grades social studies methods course with an emphasis on issues-centered curriculum, was designed and the primary preservice teachers' (n=27) reactions to issues-centered social studies were examined at the end of the semester. Teachers are often uncomfortable broaching issues, which can be controversial, with their young students. Others question whether children possess the skills traditionally equated with critically analyzing information surrounding issues. At the course's end, all of the preservice teachers expressed initial feelings of being overwhelmed with the idea of creating an issues-centered social studies unit for the primary grades. Even so, all but three of them had a positive, albeit reserved, reaction as they reflected on their experiences. There was a strong inclination to view issues-centered social studies as a means for motivating students to learn. Some, however, saw this approach as inappropriate for use in the primary grades. (Contains 29 references.) (BT)

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It threw me for a loop!: Preservice teachers' reactions to issues-centered social studies in the primary grades

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It threw me for a loop!: Preservice teachers' reactions to issues-centered social studies in the primary grades

Developing curricula around issues is not a new phenomenon is social studies education. Both inquiry and problem-based learning include issues. The persistence of issues-centered curricula could be due, in part, to the fact that it highlights the connections between social studies and the world in which students live (Evans, 1997). Wraga (1999) examined the organization of social studies curriculum during the 20th century and found definitive patterns of issues-centered instruction. Evidence of such instruction includes the examination of multiple perspectives, student debates, discussions. Even with Wraga's (1999) findings, issues-centered curriculum is an anomaly within social studies classroom, most often overshadowed by the dominant framework that includes teacher-centered, textbook-driven, subject-focused lessons (Goodlad, 1985; White, 1999).

One reason issues-centered social studies remains the exception rather than the rule may relate to teachers' lack of experience with such curriculum. Most preservice teachers spend years encountering the memorization of names, dates, and places; objective tests with right answers; and teachers and textbooks as primary resources. These experiences exhibit powerful socializing forces on preservice teachers. In the end, teachers are likely to teach as they were taught (Lortie, 1975). In addition, social studies teacher education often follows a similar "traditional design with content as the dominant focus" (White, 1999, p. 16). Is it any wonder novice teachers don't rush into the classroom and implement issues-centered social studies curriculum?

I chose to break with this content-dominant tradition and introduce issues-centered social studies to the preservice teachers in my early childhood methods course. My intent was not to compel these preservice teachers to eliminate all other means of instruction learned in previous

education courses, but to add an issues-centered approach to their repertoire. The action research study presented here arose from my interest in examining how these preservice teachers would respond to the task of designing an issues-centered social studies unit for the primary classroom.

Why Issues?

Social studies tends to be the least favorite subject of students and these attitudes tend to get worse as students progress through school (Ellis, Fouts & Glenn, 1992; Haladyna, Shaughnessy & Redsun, 1982; Shug, Todd & Beery, 1984). A variety of reasons exist for the dismal attitudes toward social studies. Goodlad (1985) observed that the methods of instruction traditionally used in social studies classrooms (e.g., lectures and rote memorization) do not motivate students to learn. There is also evidence that suggests students do not see the connection between what they study in social studies and their lives (Shug, Todd & Beery, 1984; Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985).

One reason for students' lack of motivation and feelings of disconnectedness from the curriculum could lie in the fact that "social studies…is often taught as if there are simple answers to the questions we have about the nature of society, or worse, it is taught without asking those questions for which there are no answers" (Bloom & Ochoa, 1996, p. 327). This traditional approach is not consistent with many students' complex life experiences. Students' low regard for the social studies is disturbing when you consider that one of its primary goals is to "help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an independent world" (NCSS, 1994, p. vii). An issues-centered approach has the potential to address these concerns within social studies education because it moves content from a static isolated position to a more dynamic integrated one.

Evans (1997) argues that "issues are the proper focus for social studies because they pose real-life problems, raise areas of doubt, motivate reflection, stimulate the need to gain knowledge, and highlight problematic areas of culture" (p. 200). Real-world connections have the potential to spark students' interests, especially when direct connections to their immediate lives are made. Onosko and Swenson (1996) illustrate common social studies unit topics transformed into issues-centered units. For example, "Immigration" becomes "Immigration: Who should get in and Why?" and "Global Pollution" becomes "What should the U.S. do about global pollution?" (p. 91). Students participating in an issues-centered unit would learn similar content as in a topical unit, but they would doing so in a potentially more meaningful and integrated way.

In her review of studies on issues-centered instruction, Hahn (1996) reports that the research base for issues-centered social studies at the elementary level is sparse, at best. In fact, she identified only one study before focusing on studies at the secondary level. In order to tap the existing knowledge base on the use of issues-centered instruction in social studies, however sparse, I conducted an ERIC search using various combinations of "issues, issues-based instruction, issues-centered instruction, and elementary social studies". Regardless of the combination of descriptors, no studies were identified. Issues-centered instruction is, however, represented through theory (see Evans & Saxe, 1996). If the general knowledge base is not populated with research on issues-centered social studies at the elementary level, it stands to reason that it might not be present in the elementary classroom.

The absence of research regarding issues-centered curricula in elementary social studies begs the question whether such curricula can or should be taught to elementary children. Teachers are often uncomfortable broaching issues, which can be controversial, with their young

students (Gross, 1989). Many envision the primary grades as a time for kids to be kids, protected from the troubles beyond the school walls. Others question whether children possess the skills traditionally equated with critically analyzing information surrounding issues. In response to questions of appropriateness, Joyce (1970) reminds us that children's lives are not immune to controversy. In addition, Skeel (1996) suggests that the manner in which children learn to address and cope with controversy is comprised, in part, of "the application of analysis and reason in the social world" (p. 230). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (1986) suggests that creating a learning environment that is "concrete, real, and relevant to the lives of young children" (p. 7) is an essential responsibility of teachers. It would appear to follow, then, that if children are already experiencing social issues in their daily lives, structured, systematic study of such issues would be not only appropriate, but also desired. Issues-centered social studies can provide the opportunity for children to "become reflective citizens who understand their world, who can make rational decisions, and who will be humane, participating members of society" (Skeel, 1996, p. 231). Teachers, for their part, must be coached on how to create classrooms that promote this.

Influencing Future Teachers

Most teacher educators hope that their courses will influence student teachers' beliefs and attitudes. Although some research indicates that information from teacher education courses is often viewed as insignificant or is mitigated once student teachers enter the classroom (e.g., Deal & Chatman, 1989; Koeppen, 1996; Lortie, 1975; Ross, 1988; Tabachnick & Zeichner, 1984), other studies suggest that associations with particular teacher education faculty (Su, 1992) and courses (e.g., Goodman, 1986; Goodman & Fish, 1997; Ross, 1988; Su, 1992; Zeichner & Tabachnick, 1985) can influence student teachers' knowledge of and commitment to particular

instructional strategies. For example, Goodman and Fish (1997) examined preservice teachers' experiences with methods courses and accompanying field experiences that were "designed to foster a commitment to teach in a socially and pedagogically progressive manner" (p. 96). After a semester, all participants expressed a desire "to move away from traditional modes of educating children" (p. 97). The course work either confirmed preservice teachers' existing perspectives by making the ideas more pragmatic or "provided completely new ways of viewing the education of children" (p. 102). In other words, methods courses were of some consequence to student teachers' perspectives.

Armed with a belief that teacher education can have some influence, I designed a primary grades social studies methods course with an emphasis on issues-centered curriculum. What follows is my action research study in which I examine these primary preservice teachers' reactions to issues-centered social studies. This research method allowed me to "focus on teaching, in addition to student outcomes, and on the interplay between the two" (Noffke, 1995, p. 5). My long-range goal is to strengthen my teaching and enhance students' learning with respect to issues-centered social studies.

The Setting

Personal Background/Assumptions/Biases

As a teacher educator, I bring with me various assumptions about teachers and teaching. In addition to my role as teacher educator, I was a public school teacher, as were both my parents. I have no doubt that elementary students can and do learn about and wrestle with complex concepts and issues; they just do so with a vocabulary much different from that used by secondary students and adults. To this end, I am convinced that elementary teachers need to have a depth of content knowledge as well as an understanding of appropriate pedagogy. Teachers

must be able to understand the larger ideas so that they can carefully simplify these complex concepts to make them meaningful to their young students. I designed my methods course based on these fundamental beliefs, and I shared them with the preservice teachers on the first day of class.

Preservice Teachers

The preservice teachers in my social studies methods for the primary grades are part of a larger early childhood education program. The early childhood major leads to a teaching endorsement that allows graduates to teach birth to age eight, including both typically-developing children and those with special needs.

On the first day of class, I looked around the classroom and saw 26 women and one man, all of whom were European-Americans. I briefly introduced myself and asked them to provide me with some background information on a 3X5 index card. The structure of their program does not require a content area specialization, however, I did ask for the content area(s) that interested them most; social studies was not well represented.

Over the course of the semester, I discovered that one woman was nontraditional in the sense that she returned for her degree after her children were well into their public schooling. The remainder fell into the 19-22 age-range. A few preservice teachers were married, but the majority were not. In the remainder of this article, I will discuss these preservice teachers' responses to issues-centered social studies, specifically designing a unit and planning individual lessons.

The Process

Getting Started

On the first day of class, after the basic introductions, I presented some of my basic assumptions (highlighted earlier). Next, I explained to the preservice teachers that they were going to learn about and plan for issues-centered social studies. I pointed out that examining social issues requires information and insights from a variety of perspectives. I also pointed out that they would have to go beyond their current levels of knowledge in order to accomplish the goals for this course. That is, doing their own library research was an expectation. By their own admission, they were not used to conducting library research in conjunction with instructional planning for the primary grades. However, they seemed open to the idea. They did not show signs of either an inability or an unwillingness to conduct research; but then it was the first day.

Building an Understanding of Issues

"States and capitals," "geography," "corn." These are some of the responses I received from preservice teachers during a brainstorming activity conducted on the eighth day of class. This activity was designed to spark ideas as they started contemplating an issue for their unit assignment. In and of themselves, these responses are not surprising. However, consider them in light of the following scenario: I anticipated the newness of issues-centered social studies, so I devoted seven class periods to what I considered the creation of a scaffold to support their efforts to develop an issues-centered unit of instruction. I had presented information on issues-centered social studies, engaged them in comparing this to their experiences as elementary students, to published curriculum materials, and to classroom teachers' perspectives on social studies education. They also read and discussed two articles regarding issues-centered instruction (Evans, Newmann, Saxe, 1996; Skeel, 1996).

As one student commented later in the semester, the concept of issues "threw me for a loop" (S#3[1]). I think this was true for all. My reflections for this time period support the notion that I, too, was thrown for a loop by my preservice teachers' confusion. However, taking advantage of the process of action research, I reflected, devised a new plan to re-teach, implemented this plan and reflected yet again (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). This new plan included a closer reading of Skeel's (1996) article in relation to pre-determined issues. I generated a list of issues (e.g., stereotyping, individual rights and responsibilities, and freedom of speech), which we discussed using the following questions:

> 1) Is the issue of real significance? 2) Is it likely to be or has it been continually recurring? 3)...Will students become better-informed, thoughtful citizens as a result of [studying the issue]? 4) Does the issue require judgment and/or critical thinking? 5) Are children sufficiently mature and experienced to thoroughly understand the [issue]? 6) Is it appropriate for the children's developmental level? (p. 231).

Following this discussion, we generated examples of how these issues might present themselves in the primary classroom. Issues involving freedom of speech might emerge from name calling, talking while others are talking, or swearing in school. The preservice teachers contributed ideas in both small group and whole class settings. There were still some slightly puzzled looks, but they expressed more confidence. So, I decided to move ahead and have them begin constructing their issues-centered unit plans.

Designing Issues-centered Units

Beginning with the eleventh class period and continuing to the end of the semester, I modeled lessons, in class, that connected themes from the Standards for Excellence (1994) with a

[1] Numbers represent specific methods students

variety of social issues[2]. At the end of each lesson, they brainstormed ways to adapt the content and strategies from the modeled lessons for appropriate use in the primary classroom. My rationale for doing this was to provide them with concrete experiences involving issues-centered lessons to facilitate their understanding of this approach to teaching social studies.

As I was modeling issues-centered lessons in class, and preservice teachers were reading their text (Seefeldt, 1997), I was also meeting with them individually. The foci of these meetings included my facilitating their understanding of issues in connection with the ideas they had for their unit and subsequent lessons, brainstorming ideas for lessons to include in their units, and expanding or clarifying my comments on lesson plans. A few preservice teachers scheduled meetings to contest points, to complain about the fairness of the attendance policy, and to object to my expectations of them as unattainable.

Student objections to my class were not new; however, the intensity of their resistance to my expectation that they must teach content within their issues-centered lessons was staggering. The tone of my reflections during this time period is one of frustration. I was frustrated at the insinuation that primary students "just need to be kids"; they should not or can not learn concepts associated with the social studies such as, wants and needs or supply and demand as they are connected with the economic issue of who gets what in American society. Near the end of the semester, I started to ponder whether these preservice teachers' discomfort and struggles with their issues-centered lessons was due more to their lack of content knowledge than an aversion to the approach.

These preservice teachers, as mentioned earlier, did not have a content area specialization. I was aware of this from the start, and I knew that this would present an obstacle.

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[2] Include a specific example?

The numerous responsibilities attached to methods courses makes it difficult, if not impossible, to teach all the requisite content knowledge and address pedagogy in one semester. I intended my model lessons (mentioned earlier) to emphasize content in conjunction with pedagogy in order to facilitate some content learning. Although preservice teachers appeared to learn the specific content presented in these individual lessons, they did not seem to generalize the processes I modeled to their own instructional planning for their issues-centered units.

I was not prepared for the apparent lack of interest in and/or willingness to conducting library research that surfaced after their issues-centered unit plan assignment. About a third of the preservice teachers did not engage in any reading of resource material to fill in the gaps in content knowledge related to their units. I hesitate to say these preservice teachers were not capable of conducting library research, but they did seem convinced, as one student pointed out, that "elementary concepts…are things that we do not have to read about much because we can remember the concepts from when we were taught as young children" (S#3). This was a mindset that I did not expect, nor one I could successfully dislodge.

In the End

At the end of the semester, I asked preservice teachers to reflect on the benefits and challenges associated with using an issues-centered approach to teaching social studies. I asked that their reflections consider their experiences, their feelings (i.e., the affective domain), what they learned, and what they might do with these insights in their future classrooms.

All of the preservice teachers expressed initial feelings of being overwhelmed with the idea of creating an issues-centered social studies unit for the primary grades. Even so, all but three of the preservice teachers had a positive, albeit reserved, reaction as they reflected on their experiences. There was a strong inclination to view issues-centered social studies as a means for

motivating students to learn. Several preservice teachers pointed out that issues-centered units promoted the development of children's higher order thinking skills, especially problem-solving. One methods student was convinced that such an approach "allows them to step out of their traditional role as student and gives them a chance to think about large issues on a smaller scale" (S#1). Yet another student envisioned issues-centered social studies as a means "to make sure it was exciting for the students and me as well" (S#7).

Although many preservice teachers saw the potential for issues-centered social studies to enhance children's learning, some saw this approach as inappropriate for use in the primary grades. One concern was that

> many of the issues in society are very hard to teach to children because they don't feel a connection to them....I think it is very hard to create meaning for a kindergartner about something outside of their realm of experience (S#5).

Others were not willing to address issues that might cause discomfort for (S# 4; S# 12, S#13) or "emotionally drain" (S#12) primary children.

The preservice teachers placed the responsibility for addressing many of the benefits and the challenges with respect to issues-centered social studies and primary grade children on the classroom teacher. Their reflections often referred to the potential impact of issues-centered instruction on teachers and their planning. These included greater time commitment, increased level of knowledge, concerns about resources, and grade-level appropriateness. For the most part, these were seen as challenges to overcome rather than obstacles that were insurmountable. The following sentiment exemplifies many preservice teachers' thoughts: It will be challenging to "find appropriate-for-the-grade-level content materials and to plan activities that are truly meaningful....[But] the extra time and effort involved in an issue-based unit will be worthwhile

in that I will have a quality unit to present to my students that I also enjoyed putting together" (S#8). Many preservice teachers pointed out the ease with which they could integrate other content areas into their issues-centered units.

As I pondered preservice teachers' numerous reactions, I questioned whether I made a compelling case for the use of issues-centered social studies in the primary grades. There were many positive reactions, but they were more general in nature. Only four preservice teachers actually mentioned that they were anxious to implement the issues-centered units they designed for the methods course (S# 18, S# 19, S# 22, S#24). The limited number of preservice teachers who saw their issues-centered units as usable was disappointing, to say the least. It raised my concern about my efforts to facilitate their understanding of the need to address issues in the primary grades. In addition, I considered whether my choice of modeling enabled them to recognize exemplars of larger social issues that manifest themselves in primary classrooms and to recognize possible strategies with which to shape these issues into meaningful learning experiences for children.

Implications

The results of this study convinced me of the importance of action research (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988). That is, I must systematically examine and re-examine my efforts to promote the use of issues-centered social studies units in the primary grades. It is important that I continue to monitor my interactions with preservice teachers and engage them in a dialogue that might enhance my ability to present a compelling argument in favor of issues-centered social studies.

In a larger context, I would encourage more research in elementary classrooms where issues-centered units are implemented to accompany the wide array of theory that already exists.

Such research should portray the kinds of barriers that emerge when teachers take the risk to implement non-traditional strategies as well as any influences on children's learning. In this way, preservice teachers could examine the theory supporting an issues-centered approach to social studies in light of practical applications.

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